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Special education and globalisation: Continuities and contrasts across the developed and developing world

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Introduction

Over the past thirty years, inclusive education has become the dominant discourse in the field of special educational needs across the developed and developing world, reflected in the Salamanca Statement and Framework for Action on Special Educational Needs (UNESCO, 1994), the Dakar Framework for Action: Education for All (UNESCO, 2000) and the 2006 UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. The Convention includes a commitment to promote inclusive practices for disabled adults and children across all fields of social policy, including education, training and employment.

The focus on inclusion has tended to deflect attention away from changes within the special sector (OECD, 2007; EADSNE, 2010) and the use of official and unofficial forms of school exclusion. The papers in this special edition have been written by members of an international research network funded by the Leverhulme Foundation entitled Special Education and Policy Change: A Study of Six Jurisdictions (IN-089) which conducted a range of research and knowledge exchange activities from 2012 to 2014. Network partners analysed (i) the nature and extent of variation across developed countries in the use of special schools and classes; (ii) the permeability of the boundary between mainstream and special settings and (iii) the discourses underpinning the use of special and inclusive settings in different contexts. The network developed an analysis

and critique of official statistics on the use of mainstream and special settings and their underpinning discourses reflected in policy and legislation. Of particular interest was the discursive use of official statistics within a globalised context. Special educational needs policy, with its emphasis on inclusive education, may be seen as a manifestation of travelling policy, with an overall homogenising tendency. At the same time, SEN policy is embedded within particular national and local contexts histories and cultures, thus adopting distinctive vernacular forms (Rizvi and Lingard, 2010).

The overarching question addressed by the network was the following:

In six jurisdictions (England, Scotland, the Netherlands, Sweden, New South Wales, California) what is the nature, scope and underpinning discourse of the special sector and what changes are evident in its shape and size?

Sub-questions included the following:

In the six jurisdictions, what proportion of the population is identified as having SEN and what proportion of these children are in special settings?

What are the social characteristics and circumstances of children educated in special settings and what disproportionalities are evident?

What discourses on special provision are reflected in legislation and policy documents?

What changes are evident in the shape and size of the special sector over a ten year time frame?

In this special issue, each contributor addresses some of these questions in the context of their particular jurisdiction. In addition to the core members of the network, additional papers were commissioned on exclusion in Welsh schools by McCluskey et al. and the changing nature of special needs education in Malaysia by Pei Wen Chong.

In the following paragraphs, we briefly outline some of the cross-cutting themes. The particular methods used are described in each paper, but broadly they consist of analysis of administrative data, policy and legislation and interviews with key informants conducted within each jurisdiction.

Defining the problem: Competing discourses surrounding special educational needs

Despite the general commitment to the development of inclusive education across all jurisdictions, it is evident that a range of competing discourses jostle for space in this arena. Within each jurisdiction, the configuration of dominant and subordinate discourses tends to reflect historical and cultural antecedents. There is often a disjunction between the taken for granted assumptions of practitioners, who adopt the role of ‘grass roots bureaucrats’, and policy makers at government level, who are sometimes attempting to effect systemic change. For example, as discussed by Hjörne, Swedish government policy makers have promoted the idea of creating an inclusive education system with common learning goals for all. These ideas are only partly accepted by head teachers in schools, who adhere to deeply rooted beliefs concerning individual deficit (and possibly moral culpability) as explanations for the failure of some children to achieve expected educational standards. Protestant beliefs of individual responsibility sit alongside more recent psycho-neurological explanations of educational success and failure. In other jurisdictions such as California and New South Wales, ideas rooted in technocracy and performativity, which conceive of educational attainment as system outputs, struggle to cope with the disruptive reality of children whose minds and bodies behave unpredictably and irrationally.

Systemic expansion and the rise of psycho-neurological diagnoses

A common feature across all jurisdictions is the tendency for special educational needs systems to inflate over time, drawing growing numbers of children into their ambit. This clearly reflects anxieties across the developed and developing world about the ability of education systems to equip citizens with the knowledge and skills required to survive within increasingly competitive knowledge economies. Categorical systems change over time reflecting shifting special needs discourses, and it is interesting to note that in all jurisdictions there is a particularly marked expansion in non-normative conditions associated with mental functioning. The labels attached to the 'new disabilities' vary by jurisdiction, but tend to include variants of attention deficit hyperactive disorder, autistic spectrum disorder and social emotional and behavioural difficulties. Methods of identifying such difficulties also vary, with psycho-metric testing used much more commonly in some jurisdictions such as Sweden and the Netherlands, whereas teacher judgements play a larger part in diagnosis in Scotland and England. As discussed by Riddell and Weedon, the most stigmatised labels such as social emotional and behavioural difficulties tend to be attached by professionals to children who are already at the social margins, justifying and explaining their social exclusion. By way of contrast, middle class parents may seek out psycho-neurological labels for their children as 'labels of forgiveness' which absolve the school and the family from responsibility for children's aberrant behaviour.

Statistics and the construction of social reality

A central focus of the network's investigations was the role of official statistics in constructing and explaining special educational needs discourses. Official and unofficial categories were investigated, and their use in data gathering was interrogated.

Somewhat sketchy data were available in some jurisdictions such as Sweden, New South Wales and Malaysia, reflecting either ambivalence with regard to labelling or lack of statistical infrastructure. Much more rigorous data gathering was evident in countries such as England and Scotland located within an Anglo Saxon welfare tradition, and the Netherlands, reflecting a continental corporatist tradition.

The network also explored the extent to which official SEN statistics permitted an analysis of the relationship between special educational needs and a range of social variables such as race, social class and gender. In the US and the UK, as analysed by Tomlinson and Danforth, uneasy racial politics have produced a system whereby disproportionalities in identification may be explored through official data sources. By way of contrast, in countries such as Sweden and the Netherlands, where political tensions around race and culture are increasingly evident, there has been a reluctance to gather data on racial heritage, and as a result disproportionalities in identification are concealed rather than made visible.

An interesting story is also revealed by the extent to which data are gathered on the relationship between social class and special educational needs. In some jurisdictions, such as England and Scotland, such data are gathered but are not always in the public domain. As discussed by Riddell and Weedon, the statistics gathered (but not published) by the Scottish Government tell an uncomfortable story of the attribution of stigmatised special needs labels to children, particularly boys, from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. This does not sit easily with the Scottish Government's objective of creating a collectivist and socially just society. In other jurisdictions, such as New South Wales and Sweden, such data are not gathered, since acknowledging social class differences would jar with popular beliefs about egalitarianism and opportunity for all. Throughout the network's activities, official statistics were treated

as a way of constructing, as well as describing, social reality, and this proved an interesting seam to explore.

Inclusive and exclusive systems: Uneasy bedfellows

As noted above, countries across the world have endorsed the idea of creating inclusive education systems. However, this has been accompanied not just by the rapid growth of special needs systems and particular categories of psycho-neurological difficulties, but also by official and unofficial forms of exclusion described by Graham.

McCluskey and colleagues underline the operation of school exclusion systems in Wales, a country with a strong commitment to children's rights but with relatively high levels of exclusion. The use of 'managed moves', by which troublesome children are shifted from one location to another, is highlighted as one of the means by which children are contained within the school system until they reach the end of compulsory education. Whilst such moves may enable some children to make a fresh start, they may also be a way of burying problems rather than addressing children's educational difficulties. As documented by Wald and Losen (2003), exclusion from school is one of the factors most closely associated with subsequent offending behaviour. However, under growing pressure from performativity regimes, schools are likely to opt for strategies which shelve, rather than resolve, fundamental problems.

Globalisation and economic drivers

The network explored a range of common factors influencing the development of special needs systems in the context of the homogenising pressures associated with globalisation and late stage capitalism. Anxieties over economic survival have led countries to adopt international testing systems such as PISA, the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment, which tests 15 year olds in key subjects. A

number of issues have been identified with regard to the reliability and validity of test results, not least the extent to which countries exempt certain groups of pupils, including those with special needs, from taking part (Smith and Douglas, 2014). Nonetheless, the outcomes of PISA tend to be reified, and are used by politicians to compare their jurisdiction's school performance relative to others. As noted by Hjörne, countries like Sweden, which have traditionally seen education as a public good rather than predominantly a means of improving economic performance, have increasingly adopted a 'raising standards' agenda, driven by the political fallout of perceived failure in PISA. Within such performative regimes, children with special educational needs pose a dilemma, since they are seen as compromising a country's ability to compete effectively on a global stage. In the light of such pressures, ways are sought of concealing the presence of children with special needs, either through official exemption or encouragement to stay at home on the day of the test. International testing regimes may be seen as one of the most powerful mechanisms of reinforcing the idea of the regular, rather than the irregular, school, within which children with special needs are seen as an inconvenient aberration (Slee, 2010).

Continuing the theme of globalisation, the paper by Pei Wen Chong illuminates the development of special needs systems within Malaysia, one of the wealthiest and most highly developed countries in South East Asia. She indicates that, like other jurisdictions, Malaysia has officially bought into the idea of inclusive schooling. However, the legislative and policy framework governing special needs in this country continues to reflect a medical model of disability, whereby the goal is to identify and categorise children according to their physical or psychological deficits. Chong underlines the influence of PISA within countries like Malaysia, which regard themselves as challenging the economic power of 'old world' countries such as the UK.

As noted above, within this era of global economic competition children with special needs may well be regarded as a drag on national progress rather than an integral part of the student body with similar educational entitlements.

Pulling policy levers

In an era when politicians feel themselves to be increasingly powerless to control financial systems, education has come to be identified as one of the few mechanisms which may be used to influence a jurisdiction's economic future. However, Sip-Jan Pijl's account of efforts to reform the Dutch system of special educational needs illustrates the difficulties in effecting systemic change in the light of entrenched beliefs and perverse incentives. Dutch politicians, worried by escalating costs of a relatively large special school sector, attempted to promote inclusive practices by adjusting funding regimes. Instead of allocating block funds to special schools, a portable 'backpack' system was introduced to allow funding to follow the child. The underpinning assumption was that, given the choice, parents would opt for their child to be educated in a mainstream school. Similarly, it was assumed that mainstream schools would welcome children with special needs bearing additional resources. Parents' choices would thus drive the system, leading to shrinkage of the special school sector. Unfortunately, due to parents' preference for special school placements, demand did not fall as predicted. There were some school closures, but overall the size of the sector remained unchanged. At the same time, there was a significant expansion of the number of children identified as having special educational needs in mainstream schools. Overall, the reforms led to an increase, rather than a reduction in costs, as had been the intention. Another example of a failed attempt to reform special needs education is provided by Hjärne. She describes efforts by Swedish policy makers to emphasise the social causes of learning difficulties, which are contradicted by practitioners' beliefs in

child-deficit explanations of educational problems.

Overall, this collection of papers illuminates the commonalities of special needs systems across the developed and developing world as jurisdictions adapt to the homogenising pressures of globalisation. At the same time, resistance to globalising tendencies is evident, as the specific historical, political, cultural and economic context of different jurisdictions is reflected in beliefs about difficulties in learning and the role of education systems.

The papers

The key points made in each paper are briefly summarised below. The first three papers all consider the social structuring of disadvantage via the disproportionate identification of special needs in certain sections of the population. Sheila Riddell and Elisabet Weedon document the expansion of the additional support needs system in Scotland, commenting on the clustering of children from the most disadvantaged backgrounds within particular categories. Despite lower rates of identification with ASN, children from more advantaged backgrounds have a greater chance of receiving a statutory support plan, suggesting that they are likely to receive higher levels of support. The negotiation strategies used by parents from different social class backgrounds are also discussed. The inflation of the SEN system in England is also noted in Sally Tomlinson's paper, along with a tendency to stigmatise Afro-Caribbean boys and those from poorer backgrounds through the disproportionate use of stigmatising SEN labels. Tomlinson links these trends to a tendency to demonise working class children and those from minority ethnic backgrounds, shifting blame for the current crisis of capitalism on to those who are the principal victims. The issue of exclusion from school is the focus of the paper by Gillean McCluskey et al. Although official rates of exclusion are falling across the UK, major disproportionalities persist. Children are at

much greater risk of exclusion if they are male, are eligible for free school meals, have been identified as having special or additional support needs and/or are from Black Caribbean or mixed heritage backgrounds. In relation of school exclusion, treating some children as essentially different from others often means that they are denied access to education, a fundamental human right.

Eva Hjörne's paper provides a historical analysis of shifting discourses reflected in special needs and disability categorisation in the Swedish system, which paradoxically presents itself as opposed to labelling in principle. Disjunctures are highlighted between official policies of inclusion and grassroots practices of exclusion. The tendency towards systemic inertia is also discussed in Pijl's paper. Several attempts have been made in the Netherlands to reduce the number of special schools and the proportion of children identified as having special educational needs. Various funding regimes, including a 'backpack' approach, have been devised to drive forward changes sought by government on grounds of both cost and ideology. Despite these efforts, the Dutch attachment to a large special needs sector has proved very difficult to overcome. Whilst the reforms have had some success in altering the profile of the special schools, the overall number of children identified as having special educational needs, and receiving additional funding, has increased. More children with SEN appear to be in mainstream schools, but there is little evidence that they are being included into mainstream curricula.

Graham's paper also highlights shifting policy discourses, with a new rhetorical emphasis on 'participation' rather than 'inclusion'. However, whether this equates to adaptation of the mainstream system to the needs of diverse learners, or new forms of exclusion, remains a moot point. In the context of the US, Danforth explores the implications of harnessing technocratic systems to achieve social justice goals. He

highlights the pros and cons of insisting on the inclusion of all children in testing regimes, as specified in *No Child Left Behind* and subsequent school regulation. The paper considers the extent to which the dominant technocratic discourse is compatible with a social justice narrative, emphasising the principles of equality and caring across human differences. Finally, Chong's paper examines discursive shifts and tensions within the Malaysian SEN system. In line with world-wide trends, inclusive education is emphasised in official policy, but this appears to be in a state of tension with the parallel emphasis on raising attainment. Children continue to be classified in terms of medical deficits, despite the incompatibility of such diagnoses with the principles of inclusion. Overall, tensions within the Malaysian special needs system are seen as emblematic of wider educational contradictions, as efforts to value diversity are countermanded by the tendency to value high performance above all else.

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